Salvations

Estrangement appears in many forms. The historic and modern religions are the most conscious of life's flaws, but primitive and archaic religions also can be restless with life. Human beings, whatever their culture, feel some need to overcome life's limitations and failings.

There are nonreligious means people can use to eliminate sources of estrangement. Some people place their hopes in science. Human techniques for handling nature and social relations and self-development include technology, sociology, and psychology. Medical progress, for example, has eliminated smallpox, one of nature's great killers. The virus still exists in a few laboratories, unfortunately, where it remains available for biological warfare. But perhaps in the next few centuries developments in the social sciences may make wars or terrorist attacks less likely. In general the sciences approach the threatening mysteries of life as problems to be solved. Compared to many of the religious techniques of the past, such as the use of magic or invocations of the gods, science is doing better in dealing with many former mysteries. Science is saving people from many limitations that primitive and archaic religions especially could not deal with so well.

But science cannot grasp all the complexities of human life, nor solve all
of its problems, least of all those in the moral arena, as a later chapter will illustrate. The previous chapter on universal or ultimate questions should make clear that the mysteries of life, including the alienating presence of death, unfairness, and other basic evils, are not easily reduced to technical problems to be solved by good science or engineering. There always remains the human ability to wonder and compare and question and to become restless with the limitations of life.

Some mysteries are very threatening. When they cannot be solved like ordinary problems, their threat is unrelenting. Life in the presence of unrelenting threats would be hellish. Religions save people from a feeling of limit and estrangement by seeing the other side of mystery, not as threat but as promise. Religion saves people from feelings of estrangement by perceiving in the mysteries of life a numinous presence or power that offers hope. Earlier, religion was defined as a positive response to mystery. Here is a fuller definition: religion is a response to mystery as a numinous reality that has the power to provide some form of salvation from estrangement. Be aware, however, that the word "salvation" is being used very broadly here. Not all forms of salvation offer life after death, as we will see.

The following three chapters are about forms of religious salvation. There will be many examples of various religious beliefs in salvation, because there have been a great many notions about how best to be saved from the estranging threats that life poses. To bring some order out of the wealth of traditions, the chapters have been divided according to the kinds of threatening estrangements. Chapter Five will focus on ideas of an ideal life or universe, as answers to estrangement from the natural world, Chapter Six on forms of social existence as answers to estrangement from others, and Chapter Seven on ways of achieving an ideal selfhood in answer to estrangement from self. Each of these chapters will in turn describe primitive, archaic, and historic forms of beliefs and practices.

Beneath all these divisions and examples there is still a common human story. All the many beliefs and behaviors described here are signs of the human condition of beings with the conscious ability to ask endless questions and thereby discover mystery, and to have faith that behind or within the mystery is a numinous power that upholds rather than destroys the ultimate meaningfulness of life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Peace, Paradise, and Perfection

The World as It Should Be

This universe is not always kind to us. We face lives of troubles and uncertainties, and dream of an ideal situation where nothing threatens our safety and meaningfulness. Every religious tradition has some way of acknowledging that life is not what we would like it to be, and of portraying ideal conditions that can be achieved through proper relations to the numinous powers. The traditions usually describe simultaneously how to achieve the ideal world and to establish and maintain ideal relations with others as well as an ideal self; these three elements will appear somewhat intermingled here. But the emphasis in this chapter is on ideas about beliefs in an ideal world, a place or condition or universe that does not produce frustrating limits or a sense of estrangement.

In general, primitive religions seek a good life, in the world more or less as it is; archaic religions dream of a better life, even an idealized life, but usually do not hope to be able to achieve it; and historic religions seek to escape life's limitations entirely in some sort of perfect life. The hopes of humankind have gone from good to better to best. Like many generalizations, this neat progression is too neat to be entirely correct. But it is a useful guide to some major differences.

PRIMITIVE SALVATION: AN UNBOtherED LIFE

The primitive person accepts the world more or less as it is. The tribesperson knows that it is not perfect; there is disorder within it; there are powers that cause disease and hunger. Nonetheless, the tribesperson has an unthinking faith in the universe as it appears, accepting it as reality and trusting that it
can provide for a comfortable and safe life. For the primitive person, salvation consists mainly of a defense of the stable order of the world against disruptive forces.

There are three ways the comforting pattern of life can be disrupted. The first source of disruption is by a breakdown in proper tribal order. This order was established at the beginning of time, the original time of the world just a few generations prior to what living memory can reach, by the original beings. This is the one true way to behave, the right way, the safe way. This order is composed of all the customs, laws, roles, and other behavioral patterns that make the tribespeople who they are. Violation of these patterns causes chaos and confusion, fights and family disputes, bad luck and sometimes even punishment from the numinous. Maintaining the one correct order produces peace and happiness.

To preserve the order established in the primal time is to stay in contact with those times. Thus the Australian aborigines use the ritual retelling of these stories of the beginning as “dreamtime,” when they identify themselves with their origin and become one with it again. In the modern world we value the changes that time brings, but for the primitive person time is an enemy because it contains the risk of change; it brings confusion and danger. It is better to maintain a kind of timeless identity between the “now” and the “then” of the beginning, and to avoid any future not identical with then and now. That is one form of salvation for the primitive person.

Even if the proper tribal order were faithfully maintained, there is still a second source of disruption: the activities or influences of mana-like forces and spirits. It is not enough, then, just to try to maintain correct roles, customs, and so forth; it is also important to learn about and to use the many techniques that can control the numinous powers. The spirits must be kept happy or at a distance. Mana-like power must be controlled magically or avoided. All these things contribute to saving the tribesperson from powers that can upset daily living.

The breakdown of proper order and the intrusion of dangerous numinous powers into life are the two main threats in this life that a tribesperson seeks relief from. Salvation from them means that day by day there will be good food, physical health, familial and tribal peace, individual happiness. But almost every tribe acknowledges the presence of a third disruptive force, one of great importance: death.

Some primitive tribes believe that only the death of very old and weak people is natural. All other deaths are caused by sorcerers using magic or by angry spirits. A number of New Guinea tribes, for example, believe that death is caused by enemy tribes using sorcery, and that the death of a tribesperson by sickness requires vengeance. The oracles are checked to discover which enemy caused the disease; then the tribe goes to war against that enemy. Very old people sometimes believe that even their deaths can be put off indefinitely by the proper magic. After all, no one has to die just today or even tomorrow. At least one more day of life is possible, and then one more. So the old men and women who feel their strength failing may try to hold on to life with the help of various charms, potions, and spells.

No amount of magic or vengeance, however, prevents death from finally coming. Many tribes hold farewell rites to put the dead person’s spirit to rest or send it away so that it will not return to cause trouble. Primitive people assume that it is better to be alive than dead, and that spirits of the dead are apt to cause trouble out of envy for the living.

A common alternative belief is that those who have died live in a different place, but one more or less like the one they have just left. The Apatani hill people of Burma and Tibet believe that those who die pass on to a land of the dead which is very much like the usual Apatani village. The guardian spirits there ask each male spirit, for example, how much land he owned, how many wives and children and pigs he had, and how many cattle he sacrificed to the spirits. These spirits then assign to the new spirit the same possessions he had before, including the cattle he sacrificed. The new spirit lives another normal life this way until he grows old and dies once more. Then he passes on to yet another Apatani village of the dead, and so on. The Yanomami of the Amazon and the Tobriand Islanders of the southwest Pacific have similar ideas. By such beliefs, the sting is taken from death, even though the new life hoped for is very ordinary. Primitives like their lives, accepting them as the way things are. It does not usually occur to them to imagine a new life after death that is radically different from the life they know, except that it is more often pictured as boring and dreary rather than as pleasant.

**ARCHAIC SALVATION: AN IDEALIZED LIFE**

Archaic people live in a bigger and more complicated universe than primitive people. They know more about the world, about other cultures, about complexities in their own society. They have a greater awareness that there are ways of life other than their own. One way they show this is by picturing the gods as somehow different from themselves, living immortal lives in their own abode apart from mortal people. Another way is by dreaming sometimes of an ideal life that they themselves would like to lead, one quite different from the normal human situation in the world, which would save them from many of life’s limitations and miseries.

Primitives seek to stabilize and maintain life as they know it, but also to free it from disorder and sorcery. Archaic people more often look beyond the
conditions of life as they experience it to a vision of a better life, one they can imagine even if they do not expect to attain it. Different archaic cultures have different beliefs, some quite simple and others more complex. They often contain elements retained from a more primitive past. That means it is often difficult to classify some of the beliefs as primitive or archaic, but we can apply this rule of thumb: archaic religion is more conscious that this ordinary life is flawed, and is more destructive of a different and utopian mode of existence. Primitive people seek a good life. Archaic people often dream of a better life.

The Golden Age and the Fall

One way archaic people show their awareness that life is seriously flawed is by their stories or myths about a time back in the beginning when life was not flawed. These stories also make some sense out of the disconcerting fact that life is now flawed, by describing an original mistake or evil deed that caused the present miseries. A good number of cultures have some story of an ideal primordial state without sickness or death, without anger or war, without drought or flood, without vermin or poisonous animals. This past and ideal state is often called a “golden age.”

The story in the Old Testament about the garden of Eden is an example of belief in a golden age. In this early Hebrew story from archaic times, Yahweh is pictured a little like a god of polytheistic beliefs (he walks in the garden in the afternoon to be cooled by the breeze). This Yahweh created a man and a woman and a garden of plenty where they lived. In the garden was the tree of life from which they could eat and therefore live forever, it seems. But there was another tree also, of the knowledge of good and evil, from which they were forbidden to eat. A serpent persuaded the woman to eat from this tree (women are frequently blamed for humankind’s troubles—by men, of course). She persuaded the man to eat from it also. As punishment the couple was expelled from the garden. They were cursed so that ever since then people have had to earn their bread with sweat and weariness, women bear children with pain, and all people die and return to dust. Once there was a golden age but because of the primordial act of disobedience rust, rot, and sadness afflict everything.

Similarly the Nuer tribe of north central Africa tells of a time when heaven and earth were joined. The heaven in this story is not some invisible realm but simply the sky above where a great god named Kwoth lives. People once lived in heaven too. They were happy and healthy; they did not die. Heaven and earth were joined by a rope. One day a mischievous hyena cut the rope. Those people who had been temporarily down on earth gathering some food were trapped here. Unable to return to heaven people now grow old and weak and eventually die. Today their descendants are born, live for some years, and then also die. In another African story, that of the Tutsi, the ancestor of humankind, Nyinakigwa, lived in heaven. She broke her word to Imana, the high god of the sky. As a consequence, she and her children had to leave the heavenly realm and fell to earth, where to this day there is hunger, suffering, and death.

People today in our supposedly forward-looking age still also look backwards to the beginnings, to the original ideal society. Atlantis, Mu, Lemuria are all names of mythical or legendary empires of great power and accomplishments. Various books speculate that earth was long ago visited by space people. There are many tales of the wisdom of the Ancients, of the secrets of lost civilizations. People dream of returning to an idealized and innocent state of nature. Each of these ideas represents a suspicion that once things were better than they are now, that our present limits and liabilities are not natural or inevitable but the result of some primal fall from truth, wisdom, and power. If all of us felt truly at home in our present world, such stories would be less popular than they have been.

Sometimes the story about the original error or fall offers no particular hope that the error can ever be rectified. There is a kind of numb acceptance of the sad conditions of life. The Nuer tribal story that tells of the hyena and the rope does not offer hope for a day when heaven and earth will be reconnected, although they do believe that the high god Kwoth will continue to care for them on earth. The Tutsi, however, tell of Nyinakigwa’s fall, believe that one day Imana will no longer be angry and will allow all of Nyinakigwa’s children to return to the sky, to happiness and unlimited life. Such a hope for the future, when the present sadness will be eliminated, is a hope common to much of humankind.

The Millennium and Apocalypticism

“Millennium” has come to be the label for any future utopia or ideal society. The best known millenarian beliefs in Western culture are those based on Jewish apocalypticism, which in turn may be based on Zoroastrian ideas described in Chapter Three. The word “apocalypse” is an ancient Greek word meaning “revelation.” During the period of approximately 200 BCE to 150 CE many supposed revelations were circulating in Jerusalem and other places. A few of these writings are now part of Judaic and Christian scriptures, in the books of Daniel and Revelation, for example. They were said to be revelations from God or an angel or some ancient hero about future events. Jewish apocalyptic literature promised that foreign domination over Jerusalem would be overthrown by God’s power. He would send his anointed one (“messiah” in Hebrew) who would then rule over a perfect world. As the prophet Isaiah had once promised, Israel would be a light to all nations, bringing peace and
prosperity. In the Christian version Jesus would return to rule as the Christ (Christos = "anointed" in Greek) over all the earth.

Some of these writings predicted a catastrophic end to this world-order. Fire would fall from the skies, the earth would tremble, the armies of good would clash with the armies of evil. Finally, all evil forces would be defeated. Then a new earth and a new sky above would be built out of the rubble. All those who had remained on the side of good would live on in the new earth, the heavenly kingdom of God on earth. In some of these revelations it was even said that good people who had died would be raised up from the dead and live on also in the new kingdom. The word “apocalyptic” has come to be used to label all visions that predicted a violent and sudden destruction of this world-order in order to usher in a new and perfect world-order. Even today, anyone who predicts a catastrophic end of the world is said to be preaching apocalyptic ideas.

In the Christian New Testament the last book is the book of Revelation of John ("The Apocalypse of John"). It too predicts the end of the world. There will be worldwide upheavals and natural catastrophes. The forces of good and evil—people, angels, and demons—will face off. On the plains of Megiddo (Armageddon) in Israel the climactic battle between the Christ (Greek for “anointed,” i.e., “messiah”) and the Anti-Christ will take place. There the power of God will overcome the power of Satan. Then God will send the Christ to rule over a perfect kingdom centered on Jerusalem for a thousand years. (Later Satan will briefly be released only to be defeated again permanently.) The word for one thousand years is “millennium.” Those who wait for the thousand-year reign of Christ are said to be waiting for the millennium to arrive.

Various Christians have used the book of Revelation as a guide to interpret the signs of their times. Many early Christians awaited the end of this world-order in their own times. During the Middle Ages in Europe there were many predictions that the end of this world was at hand and that Jesus was about to return. At times people left their farms and their families, devoted themselves to prayers and fasting, or went on pilgrimages, to prepare themselves for the coming of the end. Still today major religious groups such as Second Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses expect the end of the world before too long, and many individual Christian ministers and believers see all around them the signs predicted in the book of Revelation coming true now, omens of the end of this world-order. Wars, pestilence or plague, famine, earthquakes, increasing immorality, and even an increase in knowledge (because of a single line in the Hebrew scripture’s book of Daniel on this last point) are taken to be signs that the end is near.

There are many beliefs outside of the Christian tradition that anthropolo-
gists have called millenarian beliefs. In spite of the name, many of these beliefs do not involve any one-thousand-year period. And not all of them call for a destructive apocalyptic end of the current world. Any expectation that this current world-order will soon be ended and a new utopian life created is now labeled “millenarian.” In North America at the end of the nineteenth century, the Native Americans of the Western plains began to preach a set of ideas associated with a ghost dance (or spirit dance). Possessed of their lands and the buffalo, dispossessed and discouraged, Native Americans in the West began to spread the belief that if they would return to the old tribal ways established by their ancestors, then the ancestors’ spirits (ghosts) would set things right, eliminating the foreign intruders, bringing back the buffalo, and creating a happy society. This was to happen soon, not in a thousand years. Nor was the happiness to last but for just a thousand-year period. Nonetheless, anthropologists have called this a millenarian movement.

Other movements today can also be called millenarian, even in forms that do not appear to be religious. The hope of many Marxists, for example, had been that in a few generations the principles of Marxism would triumph, bringing peace, prosperity, and happiness to the human race. New Age enthusiasts hope for a state of cosmic harmony to arrive soon, a millennium of sorts but without a catastrophe to usher it in. Each of us at some times in our lives may have become attached to a utopian vision of a society to come, when everyone on earth would finally have learned to live in love and peace. Whether this utopia is ushered in by an apocalyptic catastrophe or by a gradual evolution, it would in either case now be called a millennium.

As you may be able to tell from the examples given, millenarian thought is also sometimes part of historic religion. The line between archaic and historic thought is blurred, because historic modes of thought arise out of and borrow heavily from archaic culture, and continue to mingle with it. Like archaic thought such beliefs are expressed in myth-like stories rather than in the systematic analyses found in historic theologies. They are also archaic in that the ideal life they seek is usually in an idealized world here on earth. We will see that the historic style in religion seeks something more than this. Finally such stories are archaic to the extent that they disregard the question of the Ultimate in a full sense. They settle for a godlike being powerful enough to win out eventually over all enemies, as Ahura Mazda wins out eventually over Ahriman.

FROM ARCHAIC TO HISTORIC RELIGION

Humankind long ago stumbled toward monotheism, trying out beliefs like those about Akhenaton and Zoroaster, approaching a clearer belief in a universal and unifying numinous Power. At the same time many began to
despair of this world as a place for human happiness or fulfillment. The human mind became more and more accustomed to thinking about unqualified perfection, as it did when thinking of an ultimate unity behind the confusions and conflicts of life. Human imagination began also to look beyond this incorrigibly flawed earthly existence to a fully perfect reality beyond. A golden age or a millennium began to seem merely ideal, a great improvement but not absolutely perfect. Only an utterly other-worldly realm would suffice. World-rejection did not appear suddenly in fully finished form. It began in late archaic and early historic times with a belief in an otherworldly but earthlike paradise, and its counterpart, hell.

Paradise: A Perfect but Physical World Beyond the World

The archaic beliefs in a golden age or millennium portray an idealized life on earth, past or to come. Archaic societies have also believed in some existence after death, though they do not always expect much from it for most people. It is pictured at times as a shadowy life of boredom, as in the Hades of Greek thought, or as a lifeless place of unending sleep, as in the Sheol of ancient Hebrew beliefs. A few heroes or favorites of the gods might have a very pleasant time of it, but not most people. As the axial age arrived, however, belief in life after death took a new turn.

Discouraged thoroughly by the newly perceived finitude of earthly life, estranged from life as it exists in this world, religious thinkers around the time of the axial age began to envision a perfect existence beyond this world. An early version of this is belief in a paradise. The word, which comes to us through a Greek form based on an old Persian word, meant a beautiful park with deer and fruit trees and flowing water. This is the sort of afterlife promised by Zoroaster to followers of Ahura Mazda. Islamic belief offers paradise after death to those Allah has chosen. Many Christians picture eternal life in a heaven as a paradise, although the trees and streams are sometimes replaced with clouds and harp-playing angels.

In the East, Hindus and Buddhists look forward to at least a temporary stay in a paradise, though this is not full and final salvation. Pure Land Buddhism, for example, popular in Japan and formerly also in China, made hope for paradise a focal idea. According to this form of Buddhism, there was once a golden age on earth when people followed the ways of the Buddha and achieved enlightenment as Siddhartha Gautama did. But as time passed, people slowly became less and less enlightened and finally lost their ability to follow the teachings of the Buddha at all. But the Buddha-power that existed in Siddhartha Gautama exists also in many beings, including the divine Amida-Buddha, a kind of godlike Buddha. Fortunately for people in this present fallen age, Amida has the power to transport those who trust him straight to a Pure Land after their deaths, to a paradise. In this Pure Land everyone can finally learn enlightenment as the Buddha did and then achieve the salvation that lies beyond all paradies (which we will talk about soon).

Hell: The Opposite of Paradise

In its earliest stages, historic religion has tended to believe not only in a perfect paradise rather than in just another life after death; it has also believed in various hells. Primitive and archaic religions believe that a person who is not buried properly, or whose death is not avenged, or who is not offered enough food through sacrifices, may end up troubled and unhappy. They have also pictured life after death as a shadowy and dreary state, not exactly hellish, but simply boring. That was the lot of those who went to the shadowy underground land of Hades or Sheol, which was like a place of sleep. (The ancient Egyptian belief in a happy afterlife for morally good people was unusual for a polytheism.) Early historic religion, however, has a tendency to create full-scale hells, some temporary and some everlasting.

From Zoroaster to contemporary times people in the West have often believed that there is a hell, a place of everlasting fire and torment. Many have claimed that such beliefs should not be taken too literally, but the words traditionally used make hell a truly terrible existence, a place of utter and unrelenting torment.

Some forms of Buddhism also have traditions about a hell or many hells. An educated Buddhist will say these descriptions are only poetic metaphors and not literally true, but popular beliefs portray hell very graphically. One such description describes hell as a place of excrement, of bitter-tasting dung mixed with molten copper in which there are worms with diamond-sharp beaks. The sinner who dies awakens in hell being eaten by the worms. They start with his lips, tongue, and throat, until finally the sinner is eaten from inside out, only to find himself alive again and due for more punishment. This particular hell is for anyone who kills a bird or animal for supper without feeling regret.

Zoroastrian and Buddhist thought, each in its own way, offer some assurance that hell will not be everlasting. Terrible as it is, someday it will come to an end. All evil, even the evil of being in hell, can pass away. Christianity has traditionally been less sparing. Those who have deserved hell will have to suffer there forever and ever. Some Christians in modern times have had doubts about how literally this should be taken. Perhaps, they have suggested, belief in an unending hell is just a dramatic way to express thorough antagonism to evil. An all-good God might also be all-forgiving. An all-powerful God might be able to conquer evil totally by leaving no pain or agony anywhere in existence.
Though belief in paradise and hell occur in early historic religion, these beliefs have distinctly archaic aspects. The angels and demons are like gods. They are spirit-beings, invisible to humans, but with great power. The beliefs are also expressed in mythic narratives rather than in the more abstract language that historic religions came to favor. This archaic character stands out when the ideas of paradise and hell are compared to more fully historic belief in a fully spiritual heaven, or absorption into Atman, or dissolution into nirvana.

HISTORIC RELIGION: PERFECTION BEYOND

Salvation through Cosmic Order
Before talking about a perfect reality beyond this world we should give some space to the idea of a perfect worldly order. The forerunner of this idea is the unspoken assumption among primitive people that the order established at the beginning of things is the way things are and now must be. This idea continues into archaic thought, such as Egyptian belief in “ma’at,” a word sometimes translated as “truth,” which is the basic order of the universe. In historic cultures the idea becomes even more explicit, as in the belief in India in a cosmic pattern of justice known as dharma, and in the basic natural set of duties (dharma) people should obey.

China has been a civilization thoroughly dominated by the belief that there is a proper order to all things and that adherence to this order provides salvation. The two main forms of this are found in the two traditions native to China, Taoism and Confucianism. In each the historic interest in perfection eventually appeared, although these religions were more world-accepting than historic religion usually is. In general the history of China is harder to fit into Bellah’s categories of religious evolution than are other traditions. Confucianism is as much a social philosophy as a religion. It arose about the same time as Taoist thought and shared Taoism’s indifference towards the high god or gods. The movement stems from the wisdom writings (“Analects”) of Kung Fu-Tzu, “Confucius” in Latinized form. Confucius preached social order based on a harmony among human beings. This in turn came from adherence to “li,” proper behavior and observance of customs. Conformity to li would bring about salvation from family discord, from social injustice, from political unrest, and from war. By CE 1200, a neo-Confucian called Chu Hsi had elaborated on the concept of li and described it as the cosmic right order to which all people ought to adhere.

Taoism also offered certain kinds of salvation through an understanding and acceptance of the eternal Tao and its major manifestation, the yang/yin pattern to all things. Some Taoists have always been more archaic than historic in their attitudes. In facing the problem of death, for example, many Taoists have sought to use their knowledge of yang/yin in a kind of magical way. They have analyzed the kinds of food people can eat to determine which has more yang and less yin. The ordinary person may want to mix beans and rice rather equally for lunch, because this would provide a nice balance of yang and yin aspects. Older people, however, are apparently losing yang, the more active and energetic principle, and need more of it. For vigor in old age, then, go heavy on the beans. Some Taoists spent years devising strange mixtures of gold and other elements into various kinds of food, in order to create a potion that could extend life indefinitely.

The more philosophical Taoists, however, found their salvation from the threat of death through a correct attitude. Meditation on the patterns of nature would produce an inner sense of the fundamental rightness of the natural. Death is as natural as life. So the Taoist would learn to accept it without fear or concern. Chuang-Tzu, the ancient Taoist, was found humming and making pottery in his yard the day after his beloved wife of many years had died. His friends were shocked that he should act so cheerful rather than be in mourning. Chuang-Tzu replied by asking what wisdom there was in mourning over what was as natural as eating or sleeping. A good Stoic might agree. Unlike philosophical Taoists and Stoics, however, the historic religions of the West or of India, including the Buddhism that eventually became very strong in China and Japan, looked away from this world to another reality. Bellah characterizes them as world-rejecting religions.

Heaven beyond Paradise
Western religions to this day have balanced the late archaic and early historic belief in a physical other-worldly paradise with belief in a spiritual heavenly existence wherein even the limitations of paradise are surpassed. (As we will see, the religions of India did something comparable.) For most of us, the idea of a merely perfect God is more appealing than that of an Absolute. Likewise, a merely perfect paradise can be more attractive than a spiritual heaven, as you may judge for yourself. Yet the same restless human mind that can conceive of ultimate, infinite, and incomprehensible Reality can also question the adequacy even of a physical paradise.

The movement away from belief in a mere paradise began with a change in the idea of spirit. As we have seen, primitive and archaic people think of spirit as physical stuff like air or breath, thin and usually invisible but solid enough to feel. When primitive and archaic cultures speak of a life after death for human spirits, they imagine it as a kind of earthly life, a physical place suited for physical spirits. If life is to be really human life, even after death, it would have to include the whole human person, body and spirit as one.
When historic religion developed in the West, it at first retained belief in a salvation for the whole person, body and spirit as one. The apocalyptic tradition in Judaism, one among various alternative traditions, had looked for a kingdom of heaven on earth. The living would enjoy it and the religiously faithful who had already died would be resurrected into a new whole life in this millennial kingdom. Christianity inherited this belief and preached a bodily resurrection of the dead into the kingdom of God in the new earth following the apocalyptic end of the old one. The Qur'an, Islam's sacred book, describes paradise in ways that make it a heavenly garden full of physical comforts.

These Western religions, though, have had a tendency to minimize or ignore the physical aspect of life after death and to describe it in a purely spiritual way. They have accepted a more radically distinct meaning to the word “spirit” as something utterly unphysical and unearthly. This was due to the influence of Greek philosophy, and perhaps indirectly due to Hindu ideas as well.

Dualism of Matter and Spirit
In 399 BCE the Greek philosopher Socrates (469-399 BCE) died by drinking a cup of hemlock. He had been accused and found guilty by the citizens of Athens of denying the reality of the gods and of corrupting the youth of Athens by leading them away from traditional beliefs. He accepted the punishment as a way of showing his dedication to the ideas he stood for. But when it was time for him to die his friends began to cry. To console them he gave them a few reasons to believe that it would only be his body that died, not his soul.

The story of Socrates' death is contained in a short work called the Phaedo written by Socrates' disciple, the great philosopher Plato (427-347 BCE). This story became one of the main sources in all of European civilization for the belief in the immortality of the soul. Plato begins his version of the argument with the idea that there are two major elements in each person, body and soul; and that these two elements are entirely different from each other.

Matter is limitation, Plato argued, using the figure of Socrates to say these things; whatever is material is imperfect, flawed, changeable, and therefore subject to decay. Spirit on the other hand belongs to the realm of what is perfect and changeless. The basic evidence for this is our own knowledge. The inner spirit-power we call mind is able to conceive of things as perfect and unflawed. For example, it can conceptualize the abstract idea of perfect oneness, a simple unity without parts, complexity or division, even though in the actual physical world no such perfect oneness exists. Similarly the mind can conceive of perfect justice, a state wherein all things exist in perfect order, even though in the actual physical world justice is always partial and imperfect.

Plato concluded that there are two levels of reality: one is the space-time realm of matter; the other is the invisible and timeless realm of pure essences (also called Ideas or Forms). These essences are the basic, unchanging, and perfect natures reflected in mixed and confused form in the material world. Behind the material reality we perceive lies the eternal realm of perfect and pure goodness, truth, beauty, oneness, justice, and so forth. If you cannot form any image of goodness as such, not this good thing and that good deed but just pure goodness, you are on the right track. Pure goodness, pure beauty, pure justice, apart from all concrete instances, belong to the perfect realm of essences, which no images can adequately express. Only abstract concepts can categorize them. The fact that our minds can conceive of them abstractly is evidence that our mind is not material. If it is “spirit,” it is an immaterial spirit, belonging not to material reality but to the eternal and perfect realm of essences. We can call this notion of spirit by the traditional name, “soul.”

It is very strange, in fact, Plato thought, that we live a bodily existence at all. Plato believed that the human soul is like a prisoner in the body. Some primordial flaw, some unknown ancient mistake has trapped us for a time in material existence, in time and space. But bodies die. The human soul cannot die, for it belongs to what is eternal and changeless. Our souls are naturally immortal.

We should use our time on earth to train our minds to be open to what is perfect and eternal in preparation for the death of the body. If we prepare ourselves well, at death our souls will pass back into the perfect realm of essences. Then we will spend a timeless forever in blissful contemplation of the perfection of the essences. This will be our salvation from all estrangement, for then we will have found our true home and perfect happiness without end. If we do not prepare ourselves well, however, we will be reborn in another material body. Then we will have another chance to learn to love the realm of perfection and become worthy of it.

To exist forever in mental contemplation of perfect essences is not the average person's idea of a joyful life after death. Nevertheless, from Plato's time until today the idea of the soul as a purely non-material being, intrinsically immortal, has had great influence. Plato's thought affected Christian ideas about life after death (as well as those of Islam and Judaism in different ways).

The first Christians, as was mentioned, looked forward to an apocalyptic end of this world-order and the establishment of a millennial kingdom of God on a new earth. Those who had already died would experience a resurrection of the whole person, transformed into new life in this kingdom. Christian tradition has maintained that resurrection from the dead includes bodily resurrection. But this tradition has often been overshadowed by an
emphasis on the life of the soul in heavenly existence after death, as a "beatific vision." The happiness of the soul in heaven will thus consist in an eternal contemplation of God. The mental vision of God's absolute and infinite perfection will overwhelm the soul and produce in it unspeakable and unending bliss. There is little mention of any bodily existence in the usual language about this beatific vision. The notion of "heaven" has also shifted from its original meaning as a name for the skies above where the planets and stars move about. Many Christians tend to speak of heaven as an utterly non-material reality.

Another aspect of Platonic thought that has had an effect in the West is the notion that materiality is a trap or prison and that only the soul has eternal life and value. About the same time that apocalyptic ideas were gaining popularity among many Jews, a form of thought known as gnosticism was spreading among educated Greek-speaking people who were scattered all around the countries of the eastern Mediterranean. Gnosis is the Greek word for "knowledge." Gnostics were people who agreed with Plato that our inner self was an immortal soul belonging to the realm of perfect ideas. Most people, the gnostics argued, had lost sight of their true nature as minds that belong to the nonmaterial realm of spirit. In order to achieve a lasting freedom from being born into a physical body, people must come to know who they really are, and they must know this clearly and fully. They must live in the spiritual realm and not be distracted by their bodies.

These gnostic attitudes were accepted by many people. They may have influenced Mani, a Persian who lived in the third century CE and borrowed ideas from Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Christian thought. Mani's movement, named Manicheism, preached that caring for the body would perpetuate the power of the body to hold the inner spirit captive. The way to liberation was the way of asceticism, the practice of denying oneself any pleasures. In particular Mani declared that sex was the pleasure most to be avoided because it had great power to keep people interested in physical existence. Manicheism and many forms of gnosticism together influenced early Christianity. In spite of biblical statements that God intended there to be sex and that God made this physical world and called it good, a variety of Christian groups in history declared that sex is either always sinful or at least mildly degrading, something to be avoided by anyone who is interested in spiritual values.

Platonic ideas also live on today, occasionally mixed with beliefs from India, in a number of fairly significant religious movements. (The compatibility of Indian and Platonic thought may not be coincidental; there are signs that one of them may have borrowed from the other.) For example, Christian Science, the belief of the Church of Christ Scientist founded in Boston in the nineteenth century by Mary Baker Eddy, says that people are basically souls. A soul should have power over the lesser forces of matter. True spiritual understanding and faith should make medical help unnecessary; mind should be able to cure body. There are also a number of theosophical schools of belief that proclaim that we are souls who have been assigned to our particular bodies and earthly lives in order to test and train us for greater spiritual and mental advances in a spirit realm or astral plane, as it is sometimes called.

In the Western historic religions today there is a range of belief in an ideal life after death, from the somewhat archaic-style belief in a millennial kingdom on earth, to the early historic paradise-like heaven, to an utterly spiritual heaven. It is generally safe to characterize Western historic religions as religions that look for salvation in a life to be achieved when this current world has been utterly transformed or rejected. This otherworldly emphasis has lasted until today. (We will eventually see that modern religiousness includes a return to a fuller appreciation of this world.)

 Salvation in India as Dissolution of the Self
To reject this world completely is a fairly drastic way to seek salvation from the alienating conditions of life. Major religious traditions in India have gone a step further. Hindus and Buddhists say that to escape fully from pain and frustration, to achieve final and lasting salvation, a person must escape not only from the world but even from individual selfhood. Only when there is no longer an individual "you" at all is there salvation.

While people of the West hope for life after death, the Hindu and Buddhist are afraid that we are all condemned to have to live again after death. Hindus say that each of us is a soul or self that is born into the world and dies, and then is reincarnated again tens of thousands of times. In each one of these thousands of lives there will be suffering. Never mind that a particular life might be joyous or healthy, for it will eventually end and be replaced by more suffering.

We earn happiness by our good deeds and by our acceptance of our duties. The cosmic law of justice called karma guarantees that we are eventually repaid exactly for all our good and our evil in one or more of our reincarnations. Every action has its consequences, and no one performs only perfect actions. We make mistakes, grow weak, and sin, and so we earn more suffering. Popular Hindu and Buddhist beliefs say also that we spend time between our incarnations on earth in a paradise or hell, as we have deserved. But even these pass away, and we are each threatened again by rebirth into this world. We are trapped in a sequence of action and consequences, lifetime after lifetime.

The Buddha, Prince Siddhartha Gautama, lived in Nepal in the sixth cen-
tury BCE. Buddhist tradition says that as he was growing up, his father had protected him from the sight of human misery. One day he wandered from the palace and was shocked by the sight of a hungry and ragged old beggar. He abandoned his home and family to try to discover how such misery could exist and what could be done about it.

After years of searching and learning, he finally reduced all his insights to a few essential ideas: all life is suffering; we suffer because we have desires; the only salvation from suffering consists of letting go utterly of all desires, all attachments and cares. Those who let go completely will pass into the condition called nirvana when they die instead of having to be reborn again. Nirvana is an extinction of individual self, a kind of not-being (in fact the Buddhist teaching of anatta—literally "no-self"—says there really is no true self; each of us is just a collection of attachments that produce a new "self" when the old one dies.) Nirvana is also beyond comprehension, the Buddha said, so there is not much use in speculating on what it is like.

Since the time of the Buddha, many reinterpretations of his ideas have grown up and spread throughout the world. Many of these reinterpretations speak of a kind of Buddha-land where a self may dwell in happiness. But eventually a person must let go completely of all attachment, life, and self to attain nirvana. This alone is salvation.

The Hindu tradition has similar ideas about final salvation. Being born again and again is the basic problem. The only way to escape it is to cease to be a self at all, to bring a complete end to one's individuality. That leaves, then, only what alone was real in a person, which is the presence of the eternal Atman-Brahman. It is as though when the individual self lets go, it is dissolved back into the cosmic ocean of Brahman.

The Hindu tradition says it can take many thousands of lifetimes to reach this letting-go. When we are born for the first time (why this happens is not quite clear), we have many desires. We find value in pleasure. It is perfectly natural, says Hindu belief, for a person to take great joy in good food and comfortable sleep and intimately loving sex, in majestic scenery and the excitement of adventure, in the beauty of great art and in the smile of a child. But when a person has devoted a thousand or ten thousand lifetimes to pleasure, it will all become dull. Then a person may find life's values in success, in fame and power and wealth. But eventually through thousands of lives a person will have achieved so many things so often that all success will be empty. Then a person will find life meaningful through devotion to the needs of others. A lifetime or ten thousand lifetimes can be spent in unselfish service: clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, consoling the wretched, loving the orphan, the bereaved, the lonely. But this too will prove to be an endless task, raising eventually in a person's mind a doubt about all life. Life itself will continuously produce more people to serve and be served. Generation after generation, the trail of human joy and misery goes on and endlessly on. Eventually each person comes to face the ultimate question of the purpose of things: what is any of it truly worth?

Even an endless life in paradise is not enough to answer this question. To endure forever is not sufficient as a purpose. For what purpose does one endure? The Hindu sees that the human mind can ask the ultimate questions, and because it can a restlessness will inevitably set in, even in paradise, and finally a sense of estrangement about all existence.

Thoughts like these have led Hindus and Buddhists to proclaim that the only full and lasting salvation is to pass beyond all individual existence and to fade into the cosmic ultimate, Brahman to the Hindu and nirvana to the Buddhist. In both cases salvation consists of eternal and unchanging identity with the ultimate reality. This condition is beyond our imagination because it is a union with the incomprehensible Mystery. Western religions usually deny that the individual self ceases to exist after death, but they too often proclaim that salvation is an incomprehensible and blissful union with the Ultimate mystery called God.

All of these ideas about salvation as an incomprehensible union with the Ultimate may sound vague or abstract as well as unappealing. When we worry about life's limitations and experience a sense of estrangement, hope for a millennial utopia or a paradise is usually satisfying enough. If paradise turned out to be boring in an eon or two, that would be time enough to start worrying about a subsequent form of salvation that was even more fulfilling. Yet the fact that Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and others have looked beyond paradise to an incomprehensible and eternal union with limitless mystery indicates a continuing potential built into our humanness, a potential for the infinite. To be human is to be able to reach out endlessly more.

Summary

This chapter has surveyed the various ways religious traditions have dreamed of an ideal context for human salvation; a good life in primitive thought, a wonderfully ideal-world existence in archaic thought, an other-worldly paradise in early historic thought, and an utterly perfect existence beyond this world entirely in later historic thought. (Later we will see that the modern style of religion has come to appreciate this world again.)

Any ideal context, though, is ideal only if it somehow provides also for our need for acceptance and our need for a sense of worthy selfhood. We need to be saved not merely from a flawed nature or world but also from our estrangement from others and from self. These are the topics of the next two chapters.
FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Do you take it for granted that some aspect of ourselves survives physical death, or is this an implausible idea to you? Explain.

2. When you have thought about a life after death, how have you imagined it? Is it like earth in any way at all? Explain.

3. If there were no life beyond death, would this earthly existence be meaningful and sufficient in itself? Explain.

4. Can the world be improved enough to provide adequate earthly happiness for all people? Explain. Do you think that will ever happen?

5. Does it make any sense to you to hope for some kind of beatific vision or even a dissolution of self in relation to an infinite Ultimate? Explain.

SUGGESTED READINGS


